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Vision into Words: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

Henri Petter

I

"I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, . . . an expensive and beautiful object . . ." (809). The speaker is Nick Shay, the object a baseball that could tell a story: how on October 3, 1951, in the National League playoff, it was pitched by Ralph Branca, of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and hit by Bobby Thomson to a homerun and victory for the New York Giants; and how thirty-five years later Nick paid $34,500 for it.[1] An expensive baseball, yes. But beautiful? Nick likes the feel of it, notes its colors, some of its associations (131). At one time, he strikes a sympathetic chord in the ball's previous owner, when he says, "'I don't know exactly why I want to buy the ball'" (191, cf. 809). On a later occasion, though, he remarks: "'It's not about Thomson hitting the homer. It's about Branca making the pitch. It's all about losing. . . . It's about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss'" (97; cf. 132).

The baseball, in other words, can tell different stories or play a role in different exchanges, depending upon the view – the larger vision or the immediate purpose – of those who think and talk about it as well as of those they address. Manx, for example, eager to sell the historic baseball, "makes his pitch" in terms which he assumes a fan may "buy." He posits the sentimental value the ball will one day have for his prospective buyer's son, Chuckie. The eight-year-old falls asleep during the circuitous bargaining, but much later, and after his father's death, he will find himself "regretting the loss of the one thing he'd wanted to maintain between them. That was the baseball his dad had given him as a trust, a gift, a peace offering, a form of

[1] At that time, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica* "Books of the Year" (1990, 1991), about the average annual income per household.

desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down" (611). Chuckie, that is, is to validate Manx's impromptu salesman's talk of a father-son bond.[2] How much truth is there, then, in the stories the baseball may give rise to? Is any one of them *the* true story, at least truer than any other? After all, even Marvin Lundy, the collector of baseball memorabilia, cannot guarantee that the ball he has tracked down after decades of obstinate search is the authentic Branca-Thomson ball (181, 192). To generalize: The many stories, the many goals, beliefs or visions articulated in the pages of *Underworld*, are all of them true enough – except for those that claim to be absolutely true and to invalidate all others.

I am adopting here a Bakhtinian approach to the novel and to *Underworld* as manifestly a many-voiced narrative, speaking to and engaging us with dialogic energy. Moreover, its polyphony is foregrounded by a structure characteristic of what I call "composite fiction." Composite fiction juxtaposes its many subdivisions – books, parts, chapters, sections, paragraphs, etc. – in such a manner that a reader may be more immediately aware of their multiple interactions than of their being part of an unfolding story. This produces heteroglossia, as opposed to any one-sided, monologic, rhetoric. A composite fiction in its published shape (the penultimate shape that calls for responsive readers with a dialogic willingness of their own) encompasses the stories, the truths, the visions, of numerous figures within one narrative framework. This embracing vision also balances the fragmentation of composite fiction with elements of continuity, such as, in *Underworld,* the history of a baseball or the life of one Nick Shay.

The ball was involved, Nick reminds us, in an event likely to generate two conflicting stories, of victory and of defeat. Again: Is either story *the* true one? This returns us to the ambivalent notions, the stories, of winners and losers. Keeping in mind that the complementary terms may suggest all too neat a distinction, we shall now examine them, first in the context of the "Prologue," and then with respect to several issues that affect the community, for one, and to interactions among pairs of the novel's characters, for another.

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[2] This very bond is being betrayed by the amateur "salesman" Manx, who has stolen the ball from his own son; yet it will be reasserted (528-33) by Chuckie's father, too, a prosperous professional salesman (or, less modestly, "an account supervisor . . . at a medium-sized agency" [527]).

II

In the "Prologue," "winners" and "losers" obviously first of all relate to the opposing teams, the Giants and the Dodgers. After Thomson's match-winning hit has landed in the stands and rolled under a seat, however, another contest begins: In the crowd struggling to secure possession of the now unique baseball, fourteen-year-old Cotter Martin wrests it from the last contenders, Waterson and a college boy. But Cotter's triumph is to be short-lived, for within hours his father, Manx, will carry off the marketable trophy from the sleeping boy's room. And within days, in the World Series, the Giants will lose to the New York Yankees, of the American League.[3]

We must expect neither winners nor losers, it would seem, in the long run, a consideration likely to affect the paired characters' relations. Meanwhile, let us stay with one present at the famous playoff game who is dedicated to the idea of a definitive victory. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, characteristically identifies with no team except with "whoever wins" (29), unlike his fellow-spectators Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and Toots Shor.[4] Beyond his official involvement with secrets (he is informed of a Soviet atomic test during the game), various paranoias set him apart from others – his absolute rejection of Communism, his dislike of President Truman (28), and most tangibly his intense fear of contamination by "unseeable life-forms" that he nevertheless envisions, "pathogens, microbes, floating colonies of spirochetes that fuse and separate and elongate and spiral and engulf . . . " (18f; cf. 560). The text constitutes Hoover as a man full of vindictive hate (28, 569f.), thinking strictly in terms of winners and losers (or the redeemed and the damned), the latter his enemies, of course, to be kept under, perhaps annihilated, if necessary, by nuclear power, "the means of apocalypse" (563).[5]

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[3] This sobering fact of baseball history is not relevant to the baseball's history in *Underworld*, hence not mentioned there.

[4] "Everything is connected" – this idea, occasionally stated (289, 826), is substantiated in a net of cross-references throughout the composite fiction, *Underworld*: The names of Gleason and Shor crop up again (103, 106; 699, 701); after an early mention of the *Time* piece on Klara Sax (71), there are reminders of it (250, 252). Klara remembers the Black and White Ball (71) long before the reader finds a fuller account of it (560, 575ff.); there are recurrent references to germs and gloves (18f., 241, 519ff.), to the "placid nineteen-fifties" (172, 410), to the Watts Towers (276, 492), to ads for orange juice (520f., 826), to the importance of acronyms (243, 245, 600, 606) and the number 13 (31, 122, 133, 439, 678f., 826).

[5] Hoover apparently failed to learn the lesson which Matty grudgingly came to understand, causing him to give up chess-playing: Matty could not bear losing (212, 715), and his experience of the feelings of the defeated also made him question the motivation of the

Hearing of a plan to steal his household trash, Hoover feels that it is "the end of the world in triplicate" (557). An exaggerated response, but true to a common tendency verbally to inflate minor mishaps (as in the "rape" of a lock). Like "apocalypse" or "vision," the phrase "the end of the world" is liable to become a bland colloquialism; in the context of Hoover's use of it, it is comically inappropriate. For the intended "rape" of his garbage is a carnivalesque reply to, or travesty of, an FBI method: having some mafia boss's trash can seized to be analyzed "by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, food stains, bloodstains and every known subclass of scribbled Sicilian" (558).[6]

Now any statement – verbal or non-verbal, and including FBI ploys – can be duplicated with a modified meaning, as evidenced in the taunts of children and the allegations of politicians. And any reading of a text, we know, is shadowed by other readings, which one registers not to silence them à la Hoover but to integrate them into some on-going exchange, e.g. a critical debate or a composite fiction. The outcome of Hoover's policy is implied in the finality of that painting so fascinating to him, Bruegel's "The Triumph of Death" (41, 49f.).[7] Hoover's apocalyptic vision divides the world up into the righteous "us," the U.S., and "them," the losers. The abuse he pours indiscriminately on all forms of subversion (563f.) is in fact a reductive version of various manipulations in the service of commercial as well as political strategies and working towards a "monolithic view," a vision to be shared by Americans "white, prosperous and torpid" (in the words of the *Esquire* retrospect, *Smiling Through the Apocalypse* xviii).

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winners: "You crush your opponent. It's not a question of win or lose. You crush him. You annihilate him. You strip him of dignity. . . . And then you gloat in his face. All things that gave me such naked pleasure, I began to hate" (212, cf. 707).

[6] Other overtly carnivalesque gestures are the multicolored VW Beetles spotted by Marian (600) and by Hoover's companion Clyde (568, 579), the ominous group of dancers at the Black and White ball (575f.), the hippie marchers chanting something "like *Bomb*" during the New York blackout (635), and the varieties of mimicry in Lenny Bruce's performances.

[7] "The Triumph of Death," reproduced, ironically, in *Life* magazine, becomes part of the papers showered from the Polo Grounds decks (38). Another famous Bruegel is referred to when Bronzini thinks of children's games (662, 682). There may be an oblique allusion to Bruegel's "The Fall of Icarus" (by way of Auden's "Musée des Beaux-Arts") in the footnote character of the heart-attacks occurring during the baseball game.

III

The Demings – Rick, Erica, and Eric, their son – stand for middle-class prosperity in the late 1950s. The eight-page section (513-21) in which they appear manifestly uses the language of advertising they have been hearing and complacently, complicitly, assimilating. Theirs is a "split-level suburban house, a long low two-tone colonial with a picture window, a breezeway and bright siding." Their refrigerator is "a two-tone Kelvinator" "cameo rose and pearly dawn," and they own a "two-tone Ford Fairlane convertible, . . . with whitewall tires and stripes of jetstreak chrome that fairly crackled when the car was in motion." To Erica, the "homemaker," "[a]ll things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by," like "breezeway," "crisper," "broadloom," or "scatter cushions." The greater, then, her dissatisfaction with her "satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner" – a Hoover? – when she allows herself to think of the recently launched Russian sputnik and to wonder: "Were there other . . . things we haven't been told about them? Did they have crispers and breezeways?"

The looming presence of "things we haven't been told" is also repeatedly hinted at in rumors (some directly linked with the threatening existence of the atomic bomb). Eric Deming, in 1974 an expert in sophisticated weaponry, circulates rumors about unpublicized after-effects of exposure to radiation, yet he tells his friend Matt that he does not believe the stories are true (406-18 *passim*).[8] Matt's brother Nick also has a partner (Sims) dealing in rumors, with less of a whistling-in-the-dark effect, though, and a personal edge. When Sims mentions a freighter globally refused permission to unload (and nicknamed "the Flying Liberian" [278]), he is talking of matters that concern them professionally. The two, in fact, use rumors on one another, testing their reactions to conceivable unwelcome truths. Their down-to-earth familiarity with what happens in the waste-disposal business fights shy of the dimension underlying the Detwiler theory, taught at UCLA, that "garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense . . . it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics" (287). Nick dubs Detwiler "the visionary in our midst" (285)[9] without commenting on the nature of his visions: are they just flights of fancy or carefully considered preventive blueprints? At any rate, Detwiler is talking about an on-

[8] The stories not believed are true enough to Nick at Semipalatinsk (799-803).
[9] Detwiler is identified as the garbage guerrilla who stole Hoover's trash. (286f.)

going enterprise, which must not be allowed to end up with winners and losers.

Alert to the polyvalence of his colleagues' statements, Nick meanwhile carries on his own kind of rumor-mongering in the guise of what could be called "the Ballad of Jimmy Costanza."[10] The fact is that Jimmy, his father, one day went out for cigarettes and did not return to his wife, Rosemary Shay, and his two boys. More colorful, Nick's alternative version of what happened is that his father, who was marginally involved in the gambling racket, was "wasted" by some mafia-commissioned killers.[11]

In his mainly professional talks with Sims, his black colleague, Nick shows some awareness of other looming presences. Since they are in California, one is earthquakes, Nick's recent experience of a tremor mirrored in his vision of crumbling buildings (303). Another issue thrust on him, another set of conflicting views, is articulated in the "Prologue" already. Cotter, after finally getting hold of the ball, has not shaken off his last two pursuers and is acutely conscious of being black and at risk until he reaches Harlem: ". . . if he starts running at this point, what we have is a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and he's being followed by a pair of irate whites yelling thief . . ." (52). Sims is offensively condescending about Nick's expertise in baseball and garbage and pointedly competitive while they are out jogging. And he has his own vision of "things we haven't been told." The latest census, he suggests, officially came up with the figure of twenty-five million black people in America instead of the actual thirty-five million, because the latter number would make the white people feel threatened and the black people more demanding.[12] "Genuine paranoia" (336) is what Nick detects in Sims' detection of a racist cold war in census figures. But Sims' point is that any such statistics must be kept free of any bias; and the same point could surely be made about the media, an infinitely more public matter. The fact is, however, that the distortions of Hoover's political perspective, Erica Deming's limited view, or the rumor-carriers' scenarios have their counterpart in much printed and visual reporting.

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[10] In analogy to the Ballad of Louis Bakey (612-614), which deals more startlingly with the unfaceable.

[11] What the mafia boss Badalato tells Nick ought to cancel his fantasy about Costanza (765), but he still toys with it when he does his imitations of a "movie gangster's growl" (87).

[12] The race issue, touched upon by Louis Bakey's remarks on "Long Tall Sally" (610f.), comes alive dramatically in the Civil Rights march and sit-in in Jackson, Mississippi (521-26) – a violent affair, which Cotter's sister "from up north, riding buses all the way" (522), has come to take part in.

Bronzini is "astonished," on October 4, 1951, at the *Times* front page: "To his left, the Giants capture the pennant. . . . And to the right, symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb . . ." (668). Others read the *Daily News*, headed "the Shot Heard Round the World," which is about "Thomson's heroic shot" only (669).[13] Public discernment is not being served by such press coverage, nor is it some years later, when televised news items become available for endless replay – whether the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination or its less momentous analogue, a video showing one of the Texas serial killings (or the reporting of any other "apocalyptic" occurrence: an earthquake, a flood, a plane crash).

And then there are the magazine stories that may confer ephemeral fame on some people, for whatever reason. For Klara Sax, a conceptual artist, to appear in a *Time* feature, she must have previously made a name for herself; in the case of Marvin Lundy, his collectibles would have been talked of among baseball fans. These two relate significantly to Nick, for like him they have been part of their social environments but have also markedly deviated from them. Klara, the sort of artist who maintains an observer's detachment, is untrammeled by her egotism; she could call herself "a country of one," like Nick (275). And they both harbor an affinity to chaos, an ambiguous feeling with him (806, 810), but with Klara a creative impulse: she transforms discarded military planes, two hundred and thirty or more, moored in the desert, into a flamboyant "Gesamtkunstwerk," "ranks of aircraft appearing as one unit of fitted parts, a shaped weave of painted steel in the monochrome surround" (124). Make art not war.[14]

As for Marvin, he lets it be known that it was his daughter who talked him into doing an interview for an airline magazine: "So now my picture's in twenty thousand seat pouches. This is her idea of get out and meet people. They put me in with the vomit bags" (169f.). This speech is quite characteristic of Marvin, who comes across as a memorable crank and the source of

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[13] The allusion to Emerson's "Concord Hymn" is no more irreverent than DeLillo's sly mention of the trade-mark of Nick's portable radio, an Emerson (133). An echo of epic phrasing, "in steps Thomson. The tall fleet Scot," is soon undercut by the prosaic advice he gives himself while "a little fuddled" (40).

[14] This is 1992, the Cold War over, the nuclear apocalypse (perhaps) by-passed. The five Lenny Bruce appearances between October 22 and 29, 1962 offer a replica of the long-term course of affairs: at the beginning of the Cuban missile crisis, Lenny startles his audience by translating Kennedy's presidential rhetoric into "'*We're all gonna die!*'" (506); a week later he turns it into "'*We're not gonna die!*'" (624). Moonman 157, the graffiti artist, also practises his art in response to visions of war and destruction.

enjoyable comedy. His chief obsessions are baseball, we know, and the menaces of the age, the world's and his own. His fascination with the game seems to have turned into an unbalanced "frantic passion" (191) after the death of Frances, his wife; his memories of her unobtrusively celebrate the couple's love, their complementary roles, and thus convey the actuality of his grief (168-82, 305-24). On the other hand, Marvin's concern over the state of mankind is one more variant of the suspicion as to "things we haven't been told."[15] He is paranoid in the palpably frustrating sense that Matt tries to express one day:

> Paranoid. Now he knew what it meant, this word that was bandied and bruited so easily, and he sensed the connections being made around him, all the objects and shaped silhouettes and levels of knowledge – not knowledge exactly but insidious intent. But not that either – some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was. (421)

IV

The baseball is a marketable object that links Marvin and Nick, together with their feeling that its pursuit cannot be rationalized. But there is a further connection on another level entirely, which contributes to linking them to their various surroundings. Marvin's way with words, erratic, hyperbolic, yet serviceable enough, is idiosyncratic, and so is his jumbled syntax. Praising his late wife's popovers, he elaborates: "You would put strawberry preserves on the popovers, which forget it, all life from the Renaissance onward it pales by compare" (169). He also recalls, across three decades, the time when "A museum was empty rooms with knights in armor where you had one sleepy guard for every seven centuries" (172). Yet Marvin's seeming inconsistencies and the way in which his groping for the *mot juste* draws his interlocutors into a creative partnership are not peculiar to himself, as we find listening to others. Nick, too, whom the Jesuits taught to "name the parts" (540-42) and to use precise terms (e.g., 102, 105, 337), can make sense of vaguely focussed statements and holds his own with Marian (126-131) or Sims (326-337), when their conversations run on more than one track, anchored to keywords that may offer a choice of associations.[16]

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[15] See his misgivings about never-never Greenland (315f.) and his conjectures about Gorbachev's birthmark. (173f.)

[16] This is a micro-element of composite fiction, which can also be found in Nick's narratives about his customary Phoenix activities or his mother's visit, which take up briefly and at irregular intervals some ten or twelve topics in half a dozen pages (85-90, 101-107, 803-10).

The latest exchanges between Nick and Marian take place after the end of her affair with Brian. But any confession made by either still leaves some matters unacknowledged. The shifts, the pauses, the delayed answers in Nick's part of their talks (which mirror the breaks and chronological cross-currents[17] a reader of *Underworld* must negotiate) have a good deal to do with his reticence about his past, his own remembered "underworld of images" (466). He cannot help being conscious of things Marian "has not been told" and of her need to complete her vision of the Nick he used to be:[18] of his teenage career in petty crime, of the sequence of actions and sensations at the shooting of George (779-81), of his brief couplings with Klara, "a thing in two episodes" (72), of the trips with Amy that ended in a Mexican abortionist's rooms.[19] Those were indeed "days of disarray," but if Nick longs for them (806, 810), as a rule he enjoys his accepted routines: flying to Zurich or Kazakhstan to discuss waste disposal, showing up at his Phoenix office, jogging, separating the various types of recyclable domestic refuse.

V

Between Nick and his younger brother Matt, too, there remain unresolved issues as they move into their forties and fifties. Nick used to bully "Matty" (as the latter remembers [212]), and he still patronizes him (195-197, 202-205), but this may well be the corollary of a protective attitude (744f., 806). Though they have disagreed on what led to their father's disappearance and been at odds as to what they can do for their mother (clinging to her – and DeLillo's – old Bronx neighborhood), their recurrent impatience with each other is not without its admixture of respect if not love. Less rebellious than his brother, Matt did not get himself into such trouble as Nick's "criminally negligent homicide" (502), but this also means that no judge's sentence gave

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[17] The "Prologue" is about the baseball game of October 3, 1951; it has its immediate sequels in the three Manx Martin chapters that end Parts 1, 3 and 5. (Manx sells the ball for $32.45 [652].) The "Epilogue" focuses on some time in 1992 and after (when Sunny, Nick's granddaughter, is six). In-between the events recorded move back from 1992 (Part 1) to 1951-52, the heart of darkness: at the end of Part 7 (summer 1952), 17-year old Nick shoots George the waiter.

[18] "When we disliked each other . . . , feeling routinely sick of the other's face and voice, down to intonation, down to the sparest nuance of gesture because you've seen it a thousand times . . . – when we experienced this, Marian and I, we thought it was because we'd exhausted our meaning. . . . But we hadn't exhausted anything really – there were things unspent and untold and left hanging and this is where Marian felt denied." (344)

[19] The Amy passages (548-54, 587-89) are told by an (unidentified) I-narrator, which function only Nick assumes elsewhere in *Underworld*.

him a second chance, as happened with Nick. Matt's opportunity for a crucial change comes later, when Janet refuses to make up his mind for him and he faces up to what he apparently had been trying to do: "He finally told himself the truth, that he'd wanted her to talk him out of his job. . . . He'd wanted her to feel responsible, and guilty, for making him change his life. What an edge that would give him in the years to come" (461).[20]

Opting for the languages of either candid communication, indirection, or concealment is fitting enough in an environment that allows of the use, careless or deliberate, of unreliable signifiers and polyvalent words. The very first of them, in DeLillo's novel, is "underworld," and it grows many meanings: covert Cold War policies under the shadow of the Bomb; subterranean nuclear tests which associate the realm of Pluto with plutonium, not (perennially recycled) Proserpine; earthquakes; Eisenstein's imaginary film, *Unterwelt*, as well as the real versions of *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg's [1927], Samuel Fuller's [1960]); the corrupt underground of the mafia and the deprived underground of the marginalized, some of them graffiti sprayers who operate in the subway system; the landfills and offshore dumpings intended to make waste disappear; and that "bunker system under a mountain in Nevada that will or will not accommodate thousands of steel canisters of radio-active waste for ten thousand years" (804).

For all the sense of hidden perils in *Underworld*,[21] the novel is appropriately also rich in evocations of everyday occurrences, both surprising and reassuringly predictable, and often funny as well, e.g. Nick's balloon flight with Marian (123-26), Bronzini in the Bronx (222-36, 661-83), and sections of Klara's rooftop summer (Part 4). And as if surfacing in answer to DeLillo's first word, the famous last word of the novel, its last line, is "Peace" (827). It comes at the end of a two-page excursion into cyberspace, an area of virtual reality and, as well, a virtuoso piece of prose. This coda alludes to and connects numerous concerns of the preceding 824 pages, highlighting apocalyptic alternatives.[22] The final word appears on the screen that is young

[20] But then, how difficult to find the right words at the right time, and someone capable and willing to listen, to remember! The difficulty is obliquely epitomized in the exchanges between Bronzini and his sister Laura ("drifting in and out of the past"[228]) (229f., 236).

[21] The Deming section undermines materialist contentment with a Cold War subtext and a series of cautions in the style of "Avoid contact with eyes, open cuts or running sores" (514). Along the lines of repeated broodings on the number 13, why not take note of this, in DeLillo's eleventh novel: there are eleven such admonitions here. And furthermore, when Louis and Chuckie return to Guam after a bombing mission, the ground crew are ready to go through "a checklist the size of eleven lengthy novels on the subject of war and peace" (616).

[22] "She sees the fireball . . . that can blind a person with its beauty, its dripping christblood colors, solar golds and reds. . . . The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God.

Jeff Shay's territory; you can light out for it because it keeps an option going, no less than does the birth of Sunny, Nick's and Marian's granddaughter. What is this? A soothing conclusion incongruously appended to a somber account of the end of a century and a millennium? Hardly. But an ending that fits a vision large enough to accommodate and relate seemingly irreconcilable visions of our hopefully hopeless or hopelessly hopeful world.

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No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees, . . . a device exploded above the Arctic Ocean in 1961, preserved in the computer that helped to build it, fifty-eight megatons – add the digits and you get thirteen" (825f.). I have had to renounce including a discussion that would do justice to the various roles that Sister Edgar plays in *Underworld*: the strict disciplinarian ready to strike terror into the students; the reader of movie magazines; the half-reluctant, grim missionary among the distressed living in the Bronx wastelands, paired with the younger sister Grace; the counterpart of J. Edgar Hoover, some of whose paranoias Sister Edgar shares, while devoted to a contrary ideal. I have also deliberately refrained from pointing out the abundant links between *Underworld* and DeLillo's previous novels.